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## FEATURE ARTICLES

Flower Baskets

Contemporary *Netsuke*

Armour for Foot Soldiers

# Ivory Carving Association Classmates

## LEIGH SLOGGETT and ZANMAI



fig. 1 *Changes* by Leigh Sloggett,  
boxwood with *hego* inlays, 4.8 cm.  
*Hego* is a Japanese tree fern.



fig. 2 *Shôki* by Zanmai,  
boxwood with buffalo horn inlays, 4.5 cm.

**Text by Jeffrey Klotz and Phyllis Lieberman  
Photographs courtesy of Takara Oriental Art**

**N***etsuke-shi* (netsuke carvers) have created beautiful miniature sculptures for more than 300 years. Contemporary carvers Leigh Sloggett and Zanmai are friends who share a passion for this rich tradition, yet each has his distinctive style, blending time-honored techniques with innovative artistic vision.

Their friendship began in 1993 while taking classes at the Ivory Carving Association in Tokyo. Each came to the study of *netsuke* from a different background.

Born in Australia in 1960 (where he still lives with his wife, Hosono Shôko), Leigh discovered netsuke in books in his school library when fourteen. He went on to receive a diploma in art and design, with a major in painting and a minor in sculpture. Leigh painted professionally for ten years, while still interested in sculpture. In fact, he often considered focusing on sculpting rather than painting, being especially drawn to wood carving.

Leigh had seen netsuke

collections in museums while touring Europe. The decision to actually carve his first netsuke came years later, after a 1992 sightseeing trip to Japan. Leigh soon concluded that netsuke could satisfy his passion for sculptural carving and aesthetic expression. Thinking that the best way to learn about netsuke carving was to study with Japanese carvers, he arranged to do just that.

Zanmai was born in Asakusa, Tokyo, in 1967 and lives there with his wife, Namie, and two children. Zanmai's family sells Japanese antiques so he has been exposed to Japanese art all his life. He first became interested in netsuke when, in his early twenties, Zanmai had a shop that restored old Japanese furniture within an antique market in Tokyo, where he had the chance to appreciate good netsuke.

Although fascinated, he could not afford to buy any. Instead, he decided to become a netsuke carver. To this end, he enrolled in classes at the Ivory Carving Association. Zanmai is

the art name (*gô*) he took after he won the Japanese Ivory Carving Association award in 1995. His true name is Onosato Tetsu.

Netsuke carvers have passed down their knowledge from generation to generation. Leigh and Zanmai could benefit from this tradition while studying at the Ivory Carving Association. There they received a sound grounding on which to develop their own practice.

Zanmai studied under master carvers Ryôshû and Yasufusa. He says he "feels lucky to have had two famous teachers" and still "have his own way."

Leigh studied with Ryôshû and Yasufusa, as well as Mitsuyuki, Goraku, and Bishû. Leigh credits all of his teachers with contributing to his knowledge of netsuke carving, but most of all he acknowledges his main teacher, Bishû, who helped Leigh develop the ability to infuse a piece with feeling and movement.



fig. 3 *Potential* by Leigh Sloggett  
(From an acorn grows an oak tree.  
In the oak a bird has built its nest and  
laid its eggs), boxwood, 4.3 cm.

### Practical aspects of carving

Little is known about 19th century netsuke carvers, but most were clearly hard-working and dedicated. Leigh and Zanmai are similarly committed to their art.

Leigh carves every weekday for nine hours in a back room of his house, looking out on a garden.

Zanmai's approach is more ascetic. He carves for nine hours every day until he finishes a netsuke. Then he takes a day off and starts the process again. His workshop is a corner of a fifteen square meter garage, which is usually cold in winter and hot in summer.

They both carve primarily in wood, but neither limits himself. As well as a variety of woods, Leigh sometimes carves stag antler. Zanmai prefers to carve boxwood, but sometimes uses other woods or ivory. Both use various materials as inlays for their netsuke.

They learned to work with traditional ivory carving tools. Since they started carving wood, Leigh and Zanmai use wood working tools but create new tools when necessary, as did the carvers of the past. Unlike the ancients, however, they may use an electric dental grinder for rough carving.

According to Leigh, how much he uses an electric grinder depends on

the hardness of the material. He prefers to use hand tools. He derives more satisfaction from the closer contact with the material being carved and also finds the dust from an electric grinder unpleasant to breathe.

Netsuke carvers of old had to concern themselves with functional constraints on form and design. Netsuke were meant to be worn, so their design had to be compact, without sharp or protruding parts.

The ideal functional netsuke was made from durable material and free of thinly carved areas that could break if knocked. Antique netsuke also required *himotôshi* (cord holes) placed so the netsuke would hang properly when worn. Contemporary artists no longer carve netsuke to be worn, so these constraints have gone.

Contemporary netsuke-shi differ in the degree to which their netsuke meet traditional functional constraints. Leigh believes these give netsuke their unique beauty. Zanmai also respects them. He says, "I want to combine the traditional and contemporary harmoniously in my work."

However, both carvers do occasionally push the boundaries a bit, for example by making an item a little larger than might be functionally ideal, if it works better aesthetically.

### Creative process

While Leigh and Zanmai have shared teachers, their approaches to creating netsuke are quite different. For Leigh, it is important to first fully explore the design of a piece before actually beginning to carve, so he sometimes spends three or four days planning a netsuke or *ojime*. He may draw rough ideas for a few hours and then spend additional time working up a model in plasticine.

At times, he will use play as a way to reach into his unconscious and find inspiration. For example, he will create what he calls a "5 minute model"—softening a piece of plasticine under a lamp and without any intention, quickly shaping it in his hand. If the form is particularly pleasing or interesting, he will keep it on a shelf to ponder over for months at a time.

On other occasions, an idea for a

piece can come from a dream, a doodle or something he reads. Some of these ideas evolve quickly, while others can take months or years to come to fruition. The majority of his ideas get discarded along the way.

In contrast, Zanmai does little planning. He generally makes no drawings or models. He prefers to express his ideas and feelings directly through his carving: "With a certain image and desire in my mind, I decide a theme and create it in the form of a netsuke, trying to express the beauty and character of the subject to the utmost."

Sometimes, he thinks of an idea for a new netsuke while carving. Then he writes this down on a pad for future consideration.

### Artistic vision

Contemporary netsuke give the carver (and collector) rewarding opportunities for self-expression. Leigh's subject matter covers a broad range, a result of his 'restless artistic spirit', which he says keeps him constantly "looking for different subjects and hoping to find new ways to express them artistically."

Leigh believes that being open to experience is an essential part of the creative process. His netsuke and *ojime* exquisitely capture the mystery and excitement of life. Leigh's pieces incorporate abstract forms filled with movement, and project powerful emotion. He feels the forms "sing to the subconscious, like music."



fig. 4 Fig. 3 from a different angle



fig. 13 *Frog (ojime)* by Zanmai, boxwood, 2.1 cm.



fig. 15 *Kappa with Bird* by Zanmai, boxwood with shell and ivory inlays, 4 cm.



fig. 16 *Frog with Centipede* by Zanmai, boxwood, 4.4 cm.

Edo culture greatly inspires Zanmai. Growing up and always living in downtown Asakusa has given him a greater grasp of Tokyo (Edo) culture than most Japanese not raised there.

The Japanese describe this kind of person as a "child of Edo" or

*Edokko*, because he or she is imbued with the essence of Edo culture. This is reflected in all of his netsuke and ojime.

Zanmai's netsuke and ojime depict traditional Japanese animals and mythical creatures and figures, but he portrays them in his own original and sometimes very untraditional way. His pieces are often humorous (*Frog ojime* in fig. 13, *Karasu Tengu* in fig. 14, *Kappa with Bird* in fig. 15, *Frog with Centipede* in fig. 16, *Tanuki as Daruma Doll* in fig. 17, *Shinkaigyo* in fig. 18).

Some are sweet or even endearing (*Frog ojime* in fig. 13 and *Tanuki as Daruma Doll* in fig. 17). All of his creatures and figures project their feelings. When you look at the face of one of Zanmai's animals or people, you know at once how he feels: you experience that feeling and your own reaction to it.



fig. 14 *Karasu Tengu with Owl* by Zanmai, boxwood with amber and buffalo horn inlays, 3.8 cm.

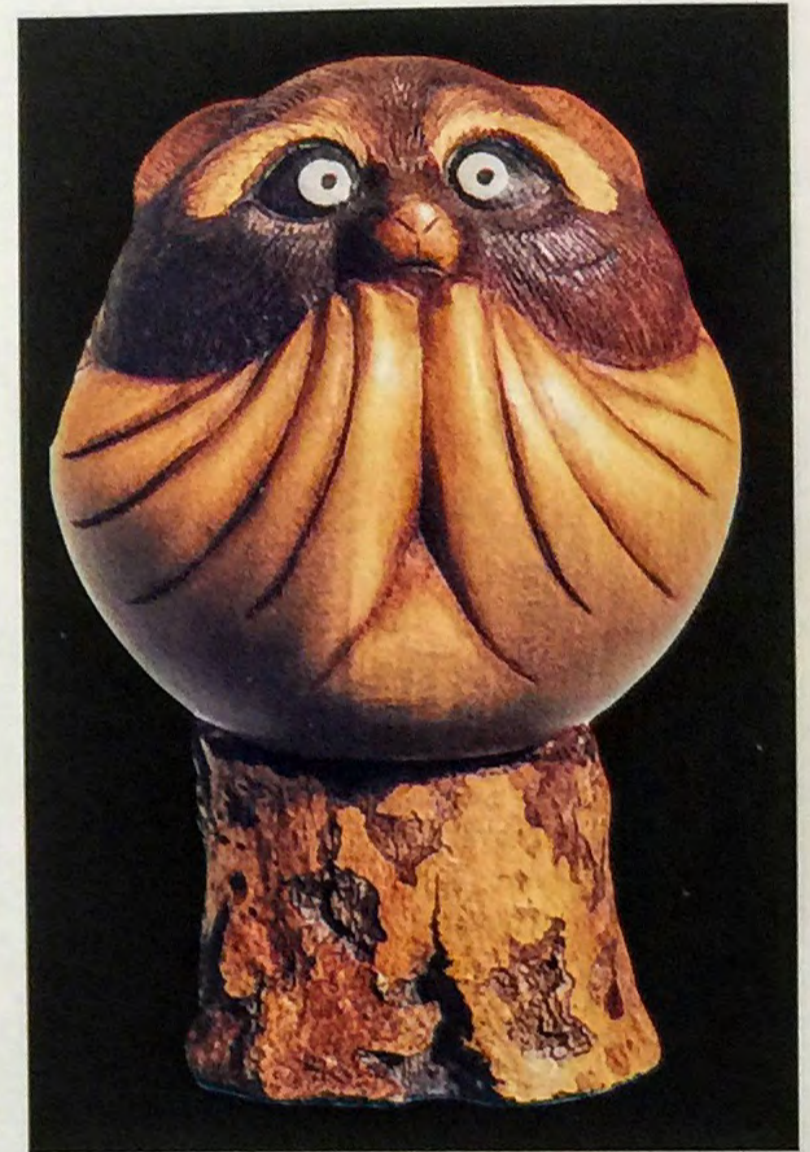


fig. 17 *Tanuki as Daruma Doll* by Zanmai, Tanuki (netsuke) sits on a decaying tree trunk (ojime). Tanuki: boxwood with water buffalo and mammoth ivory inlays, 3 cm. Tree trunk: boxwood, 1.8 cm.



fig. 18 *Shinkaigyo* by Zanmai (literally 'deep sea fish' but actually means 'new monster fish'). The fish (netsuke) is about to eat an octopus (ojime). The fish: boxwood with amber inlays, 8.4 cm., the octopus: boxwood with water buffalo horn and mammoth ivory inlays, 2.1 cm.



fig. 19 *Escape* (tiger and snake fighting) by Zanmai, boxwood with gold foil and amber, and mammoth ivory inlays, 3.8 cm.

While his creations are full of emotions, there is no harshness in them. In fact, there is often a calmness about his portrayals.

His fierce subjects do not seem very angry (*Escape* in fig. 19, *Shôki* in fig. 2 and *Tiger* in fig. 20) and even the octopus, who is about to be eaten by a monster fish, seems to be in no hurry to try to get away (*Shinkaigyo* in fig. 18).

Although Leigh and Zanmai come from very different backgrounds, their common desire to carve netsuke brought them together. While their artistic visions differ, each is extremely supportive of the other.

Like the best netsuke-shi from the past, these gifted artists are helping to keep the art of netsuke carving growing and evolving.



fig. 20 *Tiger* by Zanmai, ivory, 4.6 cm



fig. 21 *Daikoku* by Zanmai, boxwood with ivory inlays, 4.2 cm.

### Recent Exhibitions

#### Leigh Sloggett

2001-2002 *Netsuke: Fantasy and Reality in Japanese Miniature Sculpture*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, U.S.A.

2001 *The Kinsey Collection* (also exhibiting netsuke from the collection of H.I.H. Prince Norihito Takamado) at Chiba City Museum of Art, Japan  
1996-2002 *Annual Contemporary Netsuke Exhibition*, Takashimaya Department Store, Yokohama, Japan



fig. 22 *Kappa with a Fish* by Zanmai, boxwood with amber and mammoth ivory inlays, 4.3 cm.

1994-2001 *Annual Contemporary Netsuke Exhibition*, Seibu Ikebukuro Department Store, Tokyo, Japan  
1999 *Annual Exhibition of Antique and Contemporary Netsuke and Related Arts*, Sagemonoya Gallery, Tokyo, Japan, and Greenhill Galleries, Adelaide, Australia

1997 Television documentary introducing Leigh's netsuke, his work methods and related thoughts. screened on NHK, Hokkaidô, Japan

1994-1996 *Annual Exhibition of the Japan Ivory Carving Association*. Azabu Museum of Arts and Crafts, Japan

1995 *Annual Exhibition of Antique and Contemporary Netsuke and Related Arts*, Sagemonoya Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

1994 *Treasured Miniatures: Contemporary Netsuke from Japanese Collections*, British Museum, London and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, U.S.A.

#### Zanmai

2001 *The Kinsey Collection* (also exhibiting netsuke from the collection of H.I.H. Prince Norihito Takamado) at Chiba City Museum of Art, Japan

1995-2002 *Annual Contemporary Netsuke Exhibition*, Takashimaya Department Store, Yokohama, Japan  
1995-2001 *Annual Contemporary Netsuke Exhibition*, Seibu Ikebukuro Department Store, Tokyo, Japan  
1997-2000 Sunamoto Gallery, Tokyo, Japan

1994-1996 *Annual Exhibition of the Japan Ivory Carving Association*. Azabu Museum of Arts and Crafts, Japan

1996 Won the Morimura Award for his netsuke "Oni" (Demon) at the *Annual Exhibition of the Japan Ivory Carving Association*, Azabu Museum of Arts and Crafts, Japan

1995 Won the Japanese Carving Association Award at the *Annual Exhibition of the Japan Ivory Carving Association*, Azabu Museum of Arts and Crafts, Japan

The authors own Takara Oriental Art, P. O. Box 358, River Edge, NJ 07661, USA, tel & fax 201-457-0575, e-mail: netsuke@takaraorientalart.com